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WHAT IS A FEEDER AIRLINE?

BY JOHN H. FREDERICK AND WILLIAM J. HUDSON*

The concept of feeder airline is not new. It is as old as commercial aviation¹ which began in 1925, but only since 1938 have its proponents given real expression to their ideas. The term, "feeder airline," has lacked *specific* definition among those interested in this type of air transport service because there has been no clear differentiation between the character of this type of operation and the usual or conventional trunk-line operation. What had been, for the most part, a speculative interest in the development of feeder airlines began to crystalize in 1938 into action on the part of small communities through their chambers of commerce, local governments, and aviation enthusiasts to secure regular air service for their communities. Feeder airlines were to be removed from the realm of fancy into the world of reality, and the determination of groups interested in the "feeder movement" were manifested in political pressure as well as public ceremonies.

On May 19, 1938, Air Mail Pick-up Day, volunteer pilots flew mail from thousands of communities not directly served by air mail. This was expected to result in considerable pressure by Congressmen and Senators to get regular service for those communities in their districts without such service at that time.² The National Air-mail Feeder Conference at Kansas City in 1938 adopted a resolution requesting that all candidates for election to Congress support a conservative and business-like expansion of feeder service as part of the national air mail service.

Among the recommendations of the Southwestern Aviation Conference of June, 1940, was one to petition Senators and Representatives requesting their backing of new feeder lines for their sections of the country.³ On many occasions community representatives have testified before the Civil Aeronautics Board in certificate of convenience and necessity cases involving trunk-line operations,

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1. See articles in *The Dallas Morning News*, September 5, 1925, p. 4; November 25, 1925, p. 7; and May 15, 1926, p. 4; also, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, June 30, 1926, p. 28.

2. "Air Mail Week is Celebrated," *Aero Digest*, June, 1938, p. 11.

3. "Southwest Aviation Conference," *Aviation*, June, 1940, p. 69.

as to the need for feeder airline service to connect their communities with the trunk lines.⁴ Some communities have gone so far as to express a willingness to invest capital in an air transport system which would accomplish this purpose.

Whether these now vocal pressure groups have been motivated by community-interest, self-interest, or a conscious desire to see our air transport system expanded into a well integrated transportation network may in some instances be questioned. But it is apparent that these forces are gaining momentum, and some method must soon be devised to answer the growing demand for a greatly expanded, well integrated air transport system providing most communities of the nation a connecting link with the trunk lines. Equally obvious is the fact that the extension of airlines and air routes to small communities will present technical and administrative problems quite different from and, in some instances, more difficult than those encountered in the operation of our present trunk lines. Just what type of air transport service is contemplated by these lines for our small communities? Until recently everyone talked about feeder airlines, but no one seemed to know exactly what they were or how they were to operate.

The type of air service which will connect small centers of population with the primary or trunk lines of the country has been referred to by various names. It has been called at times an auxiliary air route; at other times a feeder line. By some it is spoken of as a belt line; by others a branch line. And occasionally, it is referred to as a supplementary air route. It is only natural, therefore, that there is much confusion as to the type of service contemplated or implied by each term.

There is a growing tendency to use the terms "airline" and "air system" synonymously though "air system" would properly identify the air transport network as a whole. The term "air system" will be used in the latter sense throughout this study. The term "airline" or "air carrier" will be used to mean any person who undertakes to furnish common carrier transport services either as a feeder or trunk line operator as a part of the air transport system of the country. "Air route" will be used to mean any specific area and the stations or terminals included therein which is a subdivision for operations purposes of a feeder or trunk line.

4. For several recent cases see *The City of Fort Stockton and the County of Pecos, Texas*, C.A.B. Docket No. 504; *The City of Alpine, Texas*, C.A.B. Docket No. 508; and *The City of Brownwood, Texas*, C.A.B. Docket No. 509, examiner's report served August 21, 1941. Also, *Service to Elizabeth City*, C.A.B. Docket No. 619, examiner's report served September 26, 1941.

Using the foregoing definitions as the basis, several proposed definitions of a feeder airline may be examined to illustrate the confusion created when words, each having a different meaning, are used to describe a similar operation.

In a speech at the National Airmail Feeder Conference at Kansas City in October, 1938, B. E. Cole, then President of Airlines Charter Service, said, "The term Feeder Air Route shall mean any air route on which the average distance between terminals is 75 miles or less, excepting routes in operation and carrying air mail on January 1, 1939."⁵ At best this definition of feeder routes merely sets the date on which they shall begin to exist. By this definition short-haul routes of the trunk lines, which might be classified as feeder routes, would be precluded from that category while "any route on which the average distance between terminals is 75 miles or less" that might come into existence after January 1, 1939, would automatically be termed a feeder route. The net effect would be to guarantee the status of present trunk-line operations.

When we examine this definition further we find that the limitation of average distance between terminal points to 75 miles is vague in that, while it attempts to delimit the operating area for a feeder route, the manner of statement is ambiguous. Unless "average distance between terminals" may be understood to mean that operations should be limited to an average distance of 75 miles between a base terminal and any other terminal point, there is no reason why under this definition a feeder route might not be extended *ad infinitum*. The question is raised, therefore, as to what is meant by the term "route." Does it mean the entire operating area of the feeder airline, or does it refer to a single operating division of the feeder airline as a whole?

Airline Feeder System, Inc., which operated in 1937 and 1938 and which failed to obtain a certificate of convenience and necessity under the Grandfather Clause of the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938,⁶ defined a feeder system as one "which will operate within an approximate radius of 200 miles of any given airline terminal to give the cities within that radius mail, passenger, and property service."⁷ While this definition still leaves many questions regarding the char-

5. *Aero Digest*, November, 1938, p. 18.

6. *Airline Feeder System, Inc.*, C.A.B. Docket No. 57, decided June 9, 1939.

7. "A Statement of Policy," *American Aviation*, December 15, 1938, p. 12. Two other types of feeder airlines are mentioned. "The second is the type known as the Star Route, which can generally be defined as the rural free delivery of the air mail routes to communities highly inaccessible by ground transportation. The third is the type of service . . . consisting of an automatic pickup and delivery device." These are special operating problems, and will be discussed subsequently as such.

acteristics of a feeder airline unanswered, it does have the merit of stating specifically the kinds of service to be offered as a common carrier.

A similar attempt is made here to limit the physical area over which a feeder airline may operate. But is the geographical area to be covered the only characteristic by which feeder operations may be distinguished from primary or trunk-line operations? It is difficult to visualize exactly what is meant by "system." Probably the authors use the term to describe the operating limitations for a feeder airline as a whole. Possibly they attempt to delimit the physical area to be covered by a single feeder route. Whatever the assumption may be, we can not remove the uncertainty as to which point of view to accept unless we come to some common agreement as to what term shall be used.

Less rigid in definition are the following interpretations of a feeder airline. "A feeder line is a line which connects communities off the main line, with the mainline, and by so doing feeds into the major artery the mail, express and passengers that originate in the hinterland or outlying regions."⁸ A feeder service is "a short air route operation which gives airmail, passenger and express service, or airmail and express service, to cities and towns not now enjoying scheduled trunk line service by a domestic carrier."⁹

Aside from the uncertainty of terms used in defining a feeder airline, the two definitions first discussed may be criticized for their rigid limitation of the scope of feeder airline operations. The latter definitions, while they do not place such limitations on a feeder airline, are weakened by their generality. Whether or not the type of air service performed is of the nature of feeder or trunk-line operations would not be determined on the basis of long or short-haul necessarily, though that is a factor to be considered. Nor is the fact that a city or town is or is not served by an airline a logical criteria for determining the type of service offered. This point is almost certain to be a future problem for the air transport industry and Civil Aeronautics Board to decide. The same questions are raised in these two definitions as to what the authors intend by the term "airline" on the one hand and "air route" on the other. Their meaning cannot be reconciled if we accept for our basis the definitions offered at the beginning of this discussion.

8. "Feeders," Robert J. Pritchard, *Western Flying*, August, 1939, p. 20.

9. "Feeder Airlines," Keith Kahle, *Oklahoma*, February 20, 1941, p. 9.

Since none of the definitions so far stated presents, in itself, an adequate explanation of what a feeder airline is, the nature of feeder airline operations might well be compared with those of a trunk line. Any differences provide the starting point for a definition that is specific, yet adequate.

1. The trunk line air carriers in the United States operate over routes connecting principally the larger cities of the country. Their basic function is to provide for the rapid movement of passengers, mail, and express between centers of large population. From the nature of their services they perform essentially a transfer function. Feeder airlines too, should be designed to perform a similar function between centers of small population within an area and between small communities and the larger population centers which usually are terminal points located on the trunk lines. The major point of distinction is that though a preponderance of trunk line traffic originates at the terminal point, a considerable portion of traffic destined for air carriage is delivered to the terminal points by other modes of transportation. Practically all traffic originated by a feeder airline will come from its intermediate pick-up points.

2. The outstanding characteristic of feeder airlines is the part they will play in the concentration and distribution of goods and services in the areas they serve. Not only will a feeder airline move traffic from one point to another as is the principal function of a trunk line, but it will gather mail, express, and passengers from a large number of small scattered trading areas and feed them into a few terminal points. The converse of this concentration function occurs when a feeder airline carries traffic from points of concentration, terminal points, and distributes it among smaller scattered communities. Whereas a trunk line concentrates traffic at a relatively few terminal points, a feeder airline will tend to permit a greater concentration of traffic at one end of the line and a greater dispersion of traffic at the other end. The economic and social significance of these two functions can not be over-emphasized. For while our present air transport system has played an important part in speeding up communications and affording greater mobility between areas of concentrated population, the advantages of this new mode of transportation have been felt but indirectly by the more sparsely settled sections of the nation and has sometimes placed them at a disadvantage.

3. It is apparent that because of the large number of communities that will be served by a feeder airline, the distance be-

tween stops will be short, a natural circumstance of the type of service offered. On the other hand, the distance between terminal points and intermediate stops on a trunk line is quite long since no attempt is made by the trunk lines to serve intermediate points except incidentally for such purposes as refueling or some other requirement beyond the airline's control. This long-haul and short-haul factor makes for a definite cleavage in trunk line and feeder line operations as to the number of stops, size of equipment, capital investment, and other operating considerations.

4. Closely related to the length of haul factor is the frequency of stops at points served. The number of scheduled flights between terminal points on a trunk line are dictated first, by the postal requirements of the largest point served; second, by the volume of other traffic originating at the terminal points; and third, by the necessity for making connections with other trunk line operators. The extent to which a feeder airline will be governed by any one or all of these factors is a problem as yet unanswered. But more than likely feeder airline schedules for some time to come will not exceed the minimum scheduled mail flights prescribed by the Post Office Department for a given route.

In order to feed traffic into terminal points coincident with trunk line schedules, the area which can be served by any one feeder route is limited by the time required to serve its route and get to a terminal between the scheduled stops, at that point, of the trunk line.

5. Another important difference between feeder and trunk line operations is the type of equipment used. Due to the frequent number of short-flight stops at intermediate points or feeder airline stations and the character of airport facilities at these small points, feeder lines will require planes smaller in size than those used by trunk line operators. The factor of carrying capacity alone precludes the use of the smaller planes for regular trunk line service.

6. Characteristic of feeder airlines as compared with trunk lines will probably be a higher operating cost per revenue mile flown, due to short-haul operations. But fixed costs should be lower than those of trunk lines due to smaller and less elaborate equipment.

7. Perhaps of equal importance as operating and organization differences between a feeder and trunk airline is the marketing significance of such services. While an explanation of this factor is

suggested in 1 and 2 above, the economic implications of feeder airlines is so great as to merit considering this factor in a separate category.

A glance at the airway map of the United States will show that present terminal points are located predominantly within a given marketing area. Terminal points such as St. Louis, Chicago, Boston, and Dallas, to name but a few, are the concentration points of economic activity in their respective marketing areas. The prime advantage of a feeder airline, therefore, will be to facilitate a more rapid concentration and dispersion of traffic within the economic orbit of each. Moreover, in determining whether or not a given service is feeder in character, consideration must be given to the degree to which this dual function is performed as distinguished from the primary function of transference of traffic. The traffic generating power for the market in which it is located will be a major factor in determining the character of service a community will receive.

From the foregoing comparison of some of the operating characteristics of feeder and trunk line services, we may conclude that:

A feeder airline is (1) a common carrier (2) performing the dual function of concentrating and dispersing mail, passengers, and/or property (3) within a given marketing area (4) from widely scattered points (5) to a few terminal points.

This definition has purposely avoided limiting the scope of a feeder airline by any preconceived notion as to what shall be the size of the area served; whether a community is or is not at present served by an airline; or if the distance between stops shall be a minimum, a maximum or an average of so many miles. It would seem that these are matters of operating policy and should be determined principally by the economic factors governing each case instead of by definition. In the final analysis the definition of a feeder airline and its distinction from trunk line service will be influenced also by the public policy determined by the regulating authority.